

N.Z. Herald - Thursday 28/2/08

# Sky's limit for students who seize chance to study second language

**Paul Clark says learning Chinese is important, but it's also fun, and (he swears) not hard**

**E**ACH year the Lantern Festival is a big hit in Auckland. I sometimes wonder if its success seems unwittingly to reinforce public stereotypes about China. We need to get over our tendency to make China and things Chinese appear exotic, mysterious and apparently too hard. But China literacy is available, accessible and highly rewarding.

Young (and not-so-young) New Zealanders are taking to the study of Chinese language with growing enthusiasm. They are discovering that the language is not difficult to learn and that it opens up a whole new world of knowledge and insight.

Schools in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, Wellington, Christchurch, and throughout the country are offering Chinese language instruction. Primary school children in Kristin School in Auckland begin their study of Chinese at about the same time as their formal English lessons start.

We do have a precedent for this interest in Chinese. In the late 1960s, in what we could call the first flurry of interest in our Near North, first Indonesian and then Japanese took off in New Zealand high schools.

New Zealanders who have been exposed to Japanese language at high school may be surprised to discover that Chinese is an easier language for English speakers to learn.

The Chinese Language Foundation, a group of hard-working New Zealand parents

who see the value of building China-literacy for us all, is focused on helping more schools introduce language study. Its third annual summer camp in December was a marvellous experience for 50 students.

They came from Royal Oak Intermediate, Sutton Park School, Kowhai Intermediate, and Glen Eden Intermediate, among other schools. Games, food and cultural activities offered an immersion experience over three

---

**We need to get over our tendency to make China and things Chinese appear exotic, mysterious and apparently too hard.**

---

days. The parent volunteers were fired with enthusiasm to encourage their children more in this exciting and rewarding study.

Each year, about 200 New Zealanders enrol in beginners' Chinese at the University of Auckland.

They have no background, but by the end of the year are able to hold a conversation and to read and write those seemingly daunting characters.

Many catch the bug, enjoy the cultural insights that language study opens up, and go on to doctoral study here or abroad.

The University of Auckland has offered Chinese language since 1966. I'm the third professor of Chinese since then (and the first New Zealand-born holder of the chair).

I started my Chinese study in Beijing, as one of the first three New Zealand exchange students to go to China in the mid-1970s.

Since then hundreds of young New Zealanders have studied in China.

The Confucius Institute is a welcome addition to the range of opportunities for New Zealanders to learn more about China.

This January, the institute sent 10 New Zealand teachers to Peking University, my old school, for intensive language study.

The teachers came from Greymouth, Wellington, Masterton, Christchurch and Auckland.

Classroom resources, advice for principals and planners, teacher professional development, and a valuable website are all features of a joint-venture of the Chinese Language Foundation and the Confucius Institute to light the fire of Chinese language study in our schools.

We have an ambitious target of 50,000 students across New Zealand by 2011. Beijing Olympics-related activities throughout New Zealand schools are about to start.

The sky's the limit for Chinese language teaching and for students with the foresight to seize the moment.

It's fun, it's adapted to Kiwi needs, and (I swear) it's not hard.

■ **Paul Clark is professor of Chinese at the University of Auckland and a board member of the New Zealand Confucius Institute in Auckland.**

■ Contributions are welcomed for the Perspectives pages and should be sent to [dialogue@nzherald.co.nz](mailto:dialogue@nzherald.co.nz). Text may be edited and the *New Zealand Herald* reserves the right to use material in any of its publications, including online.